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ABSTRACT

A study concerning the role the Detroit Institute of Technology (DIT) should assume in preparing for the future is discussed. DIT commissioned the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to conduct the study, which involved analysis of demographic data, interviews, and a review of courses of other institutions serving the area. Within one year DIT has a new mission statement, an approved academic blueprint, and a master plan for redevelopment of the physical area contiguous to campus. Conditions at DIT prompting the study included declining admission standards, reduced financial support from private sources, a low retention rate, and a deteriorating physical environment. Applications of DIT's approach to planning to other colleges are discussed. (SW)

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A THIRD PARTY APPROACH TO INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

A THIRD PARTY APPROACH TO INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND PLANNING

Confronted by declining admissions standards, an erosion in its philanthropic base, a low retention rate, and a deteriorating physical environment, The Detroit Institute of Technology commissioned The Massachusetts Institute of Technology to undertake an in-depth study about the role DIT should assume in preparing for the future. Demographic data were analyzed, interviews were conducted, and offerings of other institutions serving the area were reviewed. Within one year the College had a new mission statement, an approved academic blueprint, and a master plan for redevelopment of the physical area contiguous to campus.

A THIRD PARTY APPROACH TO INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND PLANNING

Confronted by the many variables impinging on the decision-making processes of all colleges, The Detroit Institute of Technology was experiencing manifold problems which had begun to impinge on its future. Factors such as a decaying physical environment surrounding a campus in the central city, a decline in enrollment, open admissions, high attrition rate, increased competition for the philanthropic dollar, spiralling inflation, increased enrollments at public community colleges, a fragmented curricula, course proliferation, a high level of dependency on international students for tuition income, too few domestic graduates, and changing needs of the community were concerns among the members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, and staff of the College.

Colleges are highly politicized organizations. Frequently, decisions are made in a compromising manner and often based on trade-offs by vested interest groups. In many instances, these decisions are not made within the context of enhancing the overall health or betterment of the institutions. As a result, change is slow and occurs in very small increments. Hutchins once stated, "It is easier to move a cemetery, than to get a faculty to change."

Planning is usually approached in a democratic and collegial manner and involves faculty, administrators, students, alumni, parents, and trustees. A typical planning process requires an estimated minimum of three years time to complete an exhaustive, initial master plan. An uncalculable cost of money can be spent in this type of planning process because of the large number of persons involved and the time they spend in meetings, completion of individual assignments, etc. However, the collegial approach to planning is considered

worth the time and the investment because the individuals affected by the final decisions have had the opportunity to shape the recommendations through advanced participation. In normal situations, colleges approach the planning process by having their various affiliated groups examine the mission statement, establish broad institutional goals, identify objectives, and engage in a curricular review. Today, many planning models are available to colleges and universities, and most require an extensive amount of time to complete.

The Process

The Detroit Institute of Technology found itself in a unique situation with immense internal problems having: had four presidents in eighteen months; to begin the initial negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement; and received notice of an imminent review by North Central. Realizing the situation in which the College found itself, it was decided to have a neutral and objective third party with high national visibility and credibility to assist the College plan for the future. It was felt an outside organization could avoid the internal political entanglements and reduce the normal time to complete a study of this magnitude from three years to twelve months. The element of time became paramount, especially in light of the press of other duties and responsibilities of administration and faculty which would have led to the relegation of the planning function to lesser importance.

In June, 1977, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology was commissioned to undertake an in-depth study to ascertain the role The Detroit Institute of Technology could best assume in delivering educational services during the last decades of this century. One full-time staff person from The Massachusetts Institute of Technology was assigned to coordinate the study. Three individuals from urban areas comparable to Detroit were selected to visit

campus on a recurring basis. These individuals were from Philadelphia, Chicago, and Houston; also, a past officer of Engineering Council For Professional Development was a part of the team. Other resource persons with expertise in given areas were brought to campus when a specific need arose.

From the beginning of the study, it was understood that all written and verbal presentations and recommendations would be given directly to the Board of Trustees. Everyone would have the opportunity for input, but no one would be able to massage the recommendations of the consultants until after the Board of Trustees had received them.

Previously, the College had undertaken several studies during a ten-year time span. The recommendations of many of these studies were never implemented. As a result, an indifferent or apathetic attitude seemed to permeate the College about consultants and studies.

An overview and purpose of study was given at the Fall Faculty Conference. Written and verbal notices were issued. Little attention was given the consultants, and only a few students and faculty participated in the interviewing process. Participation by the administration and board was rather successful.

Other opportunities for input from the internal constituent-bodies were provided through written surveys and individual and small group interviews. Demographic data on the Southeastern quadrant of Michigan were collected and analyzed; over 200 interviews with corporate, civic, and educational leaders were conducted; and offerings of the other fifty-two institutions (community colleges, state universities, private colleges and proprietary schools) serving the area were reviewed.

When the preliminary recommendations were presented to the Board, the "rumor mill" had started, and shock waves began to mount throughout the Institution. Because collective bargaining was being initially undertaken, legal counsel was sought and the communicative process was not what it should have been utilizing this third party approach to planning.

Distrust emanated from the faculty, and the media was used as a vehicle to voice their concern. The Institution was reeling with highly-charged emotions. Because of previous questionable activities, the administration and Board could not disclose fully why the changes were needed until the practices had been corrected. Everyone was placed in an untenable position until the Board finally accepted the recommendations of the consultants.

With Board approval, the decision to phase-out majors, to upgrade academic standards, and to implement new programs had significant implications regarding the human, fiscal and physical resources of the College. Upgrading laboratory equipment, improving library holdings, faculty redevelopment, hiring of faculty for new programs, designing new curricula, raising additional funds in a tight money market to offset a drop in enrollment, coping with adverse reactions to change, communicating effectively the impact of these changes, etc., were factors which had to be considered. The five W's -- Who, What, When, Where, Why -- and How had to be weighed and answered very carefully.

A third party approach to planning was a different way with which to enter into the process. It would have worked much better had the administration not been faced with negotiating a collective bargaining contract and could have established a system of communications which could have routinely been utilized. Also, social functions and other opportunities should have

been arranged more frequently for the faculty, administration and consultants to meet formally and informally. However, the process was comprehensive and expeditious.

Applications For Other Colleges

A very strong Board of Trustees and administration are needed if a college were to use this approach to planning. The repercussions on the part of certain interest groups can be overwhelming, and the tendency to vascillate is always imminent. The Board and key administrators must be committed to this approach for it to work successfully. The rationales with more than adequate supportive data must be made available to the members of the Board because a great deal of thought must be given to this process, especially if major programmatic changes are going to be made. In the era of litigation, Board members must be absolutely positive of policy-decisions of sizable magnitude for there is always the possibility of lawsuits for abdication of responsibility. Additionally, adequate indemnification and insurance coverage for trustees and key administrators must be obtained.

If a third party approach were to be utilized by other institutions, a committee of faculty, students, administrators, alumni, and parents should be established to work closely with the consultative body. The format and procedures to be employed should be fully communicated to the constituent-bodies in written and verbal presentations and repeated periodically. Meetings should be scheduled whereby the consultants are introduced, and they have the opportunity to meet formally and informally with individuals and groups on more than one occasion. Action-decision dates should be stated before the study begins, and progress reports should be disseminated throughout the process. The procedures to be employed should be explained in advance and the oppor-

tunity for challenging these procedures or to modify them should occur before the study begins. The role and responsibilities of the Board of Trustees must be explicitly understood by everyone especially the faculty. After being presented to the Board of Trustees, the recommendations of the consultants should be reviewed by the respective groups to be affected with the understanding that they can be altered, but only with substantive supportive data and rationales and within specified time constraints.

Conceptually, the third party approach is an ideal way to approach planning. Logistically and procedurally the details have to be worked out in advance and explained repeatedly and thoroughly to everyone! Once the initial plan has been approved, the plan could be implemented, managed and evaluated by existing staff with limited assistance from the contracting institution or consultative body. Also the contracting agency or group can provide assistance in designing institutional, programmatic, and student-outcome goals and objectives.

In reality, more colleges are going to have to begin to prepare immediately to shape their future. If they do not, the death knell will continue to take its toll, especially during the mid 1980's when fewer traditional students will be matriculants at postsecondary institutions. Planning is crucial to institutional viability. Under normal conditions to accomplish what The Detroit Institute of Technology achieved would take three years. If colleges continue to postpone planning, it may be too late since it takes three to five years to accomplish the changes once they are identified -- or a total of six to eight years to effectuate the metamorphosis.

A CAVEAT: BEGIN TO PLAN NOW!